THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

SALT . . . LIGHT

February 14, 1999
John M. Buchanan

Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. That is what Jesus tells the disciples to be. That is what Jesus tells his church, tells us to be and do. Love each other. Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse lepers. Cast out demons. That is what loving each other means. If the Church is doing things like that, then it is being what Jesus told it to be. If it is not doing things like that—no matter how many other good and useful things it may be doing instead—then it is not being what Jesus told it to be. It is as simple as that.

Frederick Buechner

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Matthew 17:1-8
Matthew 5:13-16

Dear God, as you led disciples up onto a mountaintop for an experience of momentary clarity and understanding, so lead us now. Then bring us back down from the mountaintop of this time together to the world where you call us to be your people. Startle us with your truth through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In her new book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott begins with an account of her conversion. "My coming to faith," she writes, "did not start with a leap but rather with a series of staggers." It is a strong story, told in strong language, occasionally language too salty to be used in the pulpit. Anne Lamott was brought up in an intentionally non-religious household. Her father, a California intellectual and a writer, was hostile to religion. He particularly didn't like Presbyterians, who he called "God's Frozen People." In her childhood, adolescence and college years, however, religious questions kept surfacing in her life. As an adult, life became very difficult for her. Her father, a life-long heavy drinker, developed a brain tumor and started to die. Her best friend, a source of stability and sanity since childhood, developed cancer and started to die. Nothing was working—personal relationships, family, her writing career—and she was drinking and using drugs heavily.

One day, near the very bottom, she called an Episcopal priest, and in his office poured everything out—her drinking, drugs, fear, affairs, the fact that she didn't really believe anything. Prayer was out of the question. So he said, "Stop praying for a while and let me pray for you." She writes, "He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren't."(p. 43).

Slowly, she came to life, and her encounter with a church was critical. Every Sunday morning in Marin City California she went to a flea market in the Greyhound Bus Depot parking lot. She went to watch people, enjoying wonderful ethnic food and checking out the tools, clothes, blankets, and household wares—much of it stolen goods.

And then she began to hear music, gospel music coming from a little church across the street, which turned out to be St. Andrew Presbyterian. Her description is classic. "It looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees." She knew some of the hymns from the time she used to go to church with her grandparents. She began to stand in the doorway and listen. "I couldn't believe how rundown it was, with terrible linoleum and plastic stained-glass windows. It had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking white man and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth. During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me. I was as frozen and still as Richard Nixon."

She stood in that doorway for months, listening to the singing, watching as this poor little congregation brought huge tubs of food for homeless people. Finally, she stepped through the door and, as inconspicuously as possible, sat in a folding chair near the door in order to escape before the sermon.

It was the people - their singing together - that drew her back week after week, from the flea market to her folding chair near the door. Finally, after a medical crisis of her own, one Sunday morning the dam

broke, the flood gates opened. She began to cry, walked home, and said to God, "I quit. All right, you can come in." She reduced her dependence on chemicals and eventually stopped drinking. A year later was baptized. Her little church rallied around her when she became pregnant, a second time, stood beside her, adopted her new son.

The book is dedicated to the people of that little church. In Lamott's earlier best seller, *Bird by Bird*, the acknowledgement page includes these words:

> "I want to mention once again that I do not think I would be alive today if not for the people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California."

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Anyone who spends any time around the institutional church not church in the abstract, but the institution, with its worn-out linoleum and its 19th century hymns and its propensity to trivialize its own gospel and its tendency to make mountains out of molehills and what is far worse, molehills out of mountains, and its use of its own message of love and redemption to be unlovely and hateful and exclusive - anyone who knows anything about the institutional church becomes impatient with it and sometimes sick at heart over it. We want it to be more inclusive, more biblical, more relevant, more Christocentric, more businesslike, friendlier, bigger . . . .

"Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church," Frederick Buechner wrote, "would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away, the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place." (*The Clown in the Belfry*, p. 158).

But then, every now and then, in fact, a lot of "nows and thens," something like what happened to Anne Lamott at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church happens, and life is saved, recovered, healed, reformed, loved, appreciated, celebrated, turned around. Every now and then, a human life is comforted, challenged, stimulated, reimagined, reanimated, renewed, reconciled, saved—not usually in the abstract, not ever in the abstract, in fact, but always because of church. Church in some mysterious and magnificent way being salt of the earth and light of the world; church giving to the world, which includes its own members, the only thing it has, regardless of the beauty of its buildings or the heft of its bank accounts, and that is Jesus Christ.

"Salt of the earth," he said. "Light of the world," he said. "You are salt and light," he said.

Modest metaphors. Neither is necessarily dramatic, certainly not overwhelming. Functional metaphors. Both act on the environment; both, in spite of their modesty, have a dramatic effect. Salt changes food, makes it more tasty, more lively. Light abolishes darkness. The darker the darkness, the more visible the light—even a tiny candle. You need to have light in order to see, you need light in order to find your way home, or wherever it is you are going.

You are salt of the earth; light of the world, he told his disciples. The great temptation of Christianity and the church has always been to get out of the world, to withdraw to a monastery, a mountaintop, or behind gothic stone walls. "You are salt and light," he said.
Your job is to live in the world on my behalf; to be seasoning for the world; to be light for the world.

All over the Christian world today, the Sunday before Lent, congregations are hearing the account of the Transfiguration, that deeply spiritual experience when a few disciples broke through and, momentarily at

least, seemed to understand who he was. The best part of that story, I have always felt, is what comes next. The disciples want to stay up there on the mountain, to revel in their spiritual experience. Peter even wants to build a shrine, a retreat center, up there in the pure, rarified air of the mountaintop. But Jesus leads them back down to the valley, to the people, the clamoring crowds, to the dirt and sickness and injustice and the joy and ecstasy and delight of human life; down to a sick little boy and his frantic father.

"In Jesus, God hits the streets," Jim Wallis says. "God is in this with us." (*Envisioning the New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry*). And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, writing to his parents the day after an assassination attempt on Hitler's life failed and therefore the day he knew, with a final certainty, that he was going to die: "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it. Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe." (*Letters and Papers from Prison, July 21, 1944*).

It was an important moment in my own journey when I began to see that being a Christian, an intentional follower of Jesus, means living more deeply in the world, not less; that Jesus Christ does not want us to withdraw from human life in order to be faithful to him, but to plunge more deeply into life; that Christian faith and Christian life are not adhering to a list of prohibitions which I, and many others I know, came to assume it was—don't do this, don't do that—a life greatly diminished by Jesus Christ. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Jesus Christ is God's great "Yes," to life; following him means living more intentionally, more passionately, exposing oneself to more love, more pain, more joy, more suffering, more laughter, more tears.

"You are the salt of the earth . . . light of the world."

For years this church has understood its mission, its reason for being, in terms of Jesus' call to follow him into the world. From its inception, here on this busy human intersection, a corner where the whole world walks by, this church has opened its doors and its heart to welcome in all who will come, and to send out into the world all who would follow.

Tutors and students, parents and children, single and married, troubled people needing support, addicted people needing hope, energetic people looking for a better reason to live than their escalating lifestyles, nurses and doctors, social workers and teachers, to the four corners of the world—Korea, Africa, Guatemala; older adults needing a place, someone to pay attention; homeless looking for a place to sleep; hungry people looking for bread to eat; cold, shivering people needing a coat; young parents needing a safe place for their child; adolescents needing patience and steady, attentive love.

We presume here to call ourselves a "light in the city." Jesus call us the light of the world, and we presume to use that description because that is what we try to be and to do.

The light is for us, too. For the city, we hope the light means hope, illumination, understanding; a little less darkness, perhaps. For us, trying to be Light in the City, light means home.

Douglas John Hall wrote recently that the world is desperately hungry for what the Christian faith and the Christian church inherently has. He says the post-modern world approaching a new millenium is on four quests.

The Quest for Moral Authenticity, which we thought about last week.

The Quest for Meaningful Community is second.

And that, too, is our hope; that while we devote everything we have to being a light in the city, the light of the world, the same light will comfort and welcome and lead us home.

You are the light of the world. You are salt of the earth. Where you are, you change the world around you. Where you work, what you work for, how you work, you make life more human when something of the love of Jesus Christ is in you.

At the end of the story of her coming to faith, Anne Lamott relates a story her minister told once. Her minister is an African-American women named Veronica. "When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You could leave me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'"

Anne Lamott concludes, "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine, because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their voices, I can always find my way home." (p. 55).

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world."

Thanks be to God. Amen.